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ABSTRACT

This paper examines linkages between educational philosophy and classroom activities and presents 10 guidelines for early childhood teachers and administrators to effectively strengthen these linkages. The 10 guidelines are: (1) each child has a capacity to respond to what the teacher brings to the classroom; (2) educators need to open the world to children; (3) although some children come from a low income background, they can be attracted to and understand what the teacher brings to them; (4) teachers can unwittingly limit creativity by the words they use with children; (5) educators can help children learn personal hygiene and health practices; (6) educators can help children make gains at school by helping them know that they are valued as individuals; (7) educators need to teach children about technology; (8) educators need to recognize cultural diversity; (9) language learning is essential to the acquisition of knowledge, rational thought, and reasoning processes, and affects personality development; and (10) humor is important and children need to be allowed to be silly in activities involving poetry, singing, dancing, and art. The paper also asserts that most teachers have high ideals for children in their classroom and know how their behavior affects children's enjoyment and learning. Analyzing self-behavior is therefore worth the effort to bring changes in one's behavior to benefit children. (Contains 13 references.) (KDFB)

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April, 1997

MAKING OUR PHILOSOPHY A CLASSROOM REALITY FOR CHILDREN

ED 407 124

Introduction

There can be a wonderful magic in translating our philosophy for respecting children's skills and feelings into the work they do in the classroom. When teachers can link their ideas to the actual activities children do in the classroom, they can derive great satisfaction in their professional goals for children.

Most of us, as teachers or administrators, in the field of early childhood education have high goals for children in the classroom. We want them to enjoy learning and being at school. We want to have a curriculum that will help them achieve at their levels of abilities and talents--and even beyond. The difficulty in bringing these goals to light and actually having children succeed at their higher levels of learning lies in the teacher's skills in at least ten different areas of knowledge.

A. Guidelines for Effective Action

The **first** guideline to remember is that each child **has a capacity** to respond to what the teacher brings to the classroom. A child's response depends on whether the teacher knows what the child is capable of doing, what the child's interests might be, whether the teacher has the patience to allow a child to respond slowly at first, and not give up on the child if he or she does not seem enthusiastic in his or her first attempts.

Howard Gardner, who wrote *Frames of Mind* and *Multiple Intelligences*, indicates that all of us have at least seven intelligences in varying capacities and at different levels. Knowing this, a teacher can have greater assurance that children can learn, given that they do not have any serious physical neurological problems. We simply have to have faith that if we present activities that are of interest to them, not too simple, nor too overwhelming, they can gain knowledge of different kinds while being at school.

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The **second** guideline refers to the opening of the world to children as our professional theme suggests. This means that we have to let children know as much as possible about the ideas that are out in the world for them. We have to show them how to use art media, books, maps at their levels of understanding. We have to bring resources to them, such as musical instruments and the people who play them. We bring them to plays for young people. We let them see other children in ballet presentations.

Communities typically provide museums showing artistic works as well as scientific "discovery" (hands-on for children) museums. Cities and towns can provide many opportunities for children to learn about space technology, parades with national and local heroes, spiritual activities, celebrated singers and dancers. There are so many resources available in our nation. They need to brought to children's attention.

The **third** guideline that a teacher needs to remember is that although some children may come from a low income background, they can, however, be attracted to and understand what the teacher brings to them. For example, how airplanes stay up in the air is a concern, not only to adults, but of interest to children--for different reasons, perhaps. Many adults are afraid of flying. This is not unreasonable, of course. The news media let us know of the many mishaps in the air. Our confidence is not enriched by this knowledge.

What may be a difficult concept for some of us to understand at the adult stage of life is not always difficult for a child. Some of us who are learning to use a computer may find it more difficult than young children do. When the software is adjusted to the understanding of a child, it is not an overwhelming task for the child.

If a child has difficulty learning to speak fluently, or has come from a country outside the United States, it does not mean that the child is not bright. Howard Gardner makes an important point in his book, *The Unschooled Mind*, "By the age of five or six, children have developed robust senses of three overlapping realms. In the world of physical objects, they have developed a theory of matter; in the world of living organisms, they have developed a theory of life; and in the world of human beings, they

have developed a theory of the mind that incorporates a theory of the self." (p. 85)

Gardner also states that "Children bring this formidable 'homespun' set of theories, competences, understandings, and penchants with them to school; and of course, these in turn strongly influence the way in which the young students apprehend newly encountered materials." (p. 85) In essence, what we are asked to accept or acknowledge is the fact that the young children we see have already developed sets of ideas and concepts even though they may not express them to us. The activities and materials we present to them for their manipulation can bring out to us what they already know.

Because all children learn in different ways and styles--some are better in the arts, others may be stronger in reading, math or science or physical education--educators should realize that not all children will respond in the same way to certain activities and materials we present to them. Any experimentation with water, magnets, flour, eggs may be new to some children, but not necessarily to all.

A **fourth** guideline to remember is that teachers can unwittingly limit creativity by the words they use with children. When teachers present an activity saying that all the children have to use the same colors when they are painting feathers on a headband they are making, children's creativity is limited. When we tell children that the bark of the tree is brown and expect them to use only that color, we are limiting their creativity. They need to express their products in the way they choose--not the way we choose for them.

Children need to feel that the teacher trusts and respects their products. The teacher needs to emphasize the strong points in the child's work. Mention the interesting colors the child used. Express admiration for a strong line, a short one, a wide one, or a narrow squiggly line. Let the children know that their work, thought, and time spent in thinking about it are appreciated. Place children's papers on display so that every child knows that his or work is valued. Children can learn to analyze the work of others.

We want children to learn how to be healthy, prevent illnesses, and learn how to eat properly. The **fifth** guideline reminds us that we can help children know how to take care of themselves by brushing their teeth, being clean, getting enough rest, staying away from excessive amounts of sweets, fats, and other dietary threats. We can bring into the classroom puppets, videotapes, resource people, such as the school nurse or doctor. They can present in an interesting manner or with appropriate props the proper way to brush our teeth, using care in keeping toy usage safe, watching for dangerous equipment and avoiding their use.

Children can learn that when they develop good health habits, they can have vitality, feel strong, go to parties, enjoy sports and have many opportunities to enjoy themselves. They can have the energy to learn, to visit museums, to try their skills at different activities. It pays off in productivity and happiness to take care of themselves. In that sense, they are not intimidated by learning that they must brush their teeth, not eat excessive amounts of sweets or desserts, nor avoid getting enough sleep. They must be careful in riding a tricycle, should not pick up rusty nails and must observe many other cautions while they play or do their work at school, indoors or out on the playground.

Social behavior and children's interaction with one another provides another very significant point for the mental health of young children. When they feel they are liked by others, and know how to express themselves in playing or working with other children, they enjoy school. They can value themselves when they feel that others value them as well. Daniel Goleman, in his book on *Emotional Intelligence*, emphasizes the importance of knowing what to say and do when we are with others. He states that: "At best, IQ contributes to about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces." (p. 34) He points out that an important characteristic in emotional intelligence is to persist in what we want to do even in the face of frustrations; we need to regulate our moods and to prevent distress from debilitating our actions to succeed. (p. 34)

OUR PHILOSOPHY AND KNOWLEDGE	REALITY IN THE CLASSROOM
Nurturing creativity	Offer experiences in self-expression, e.g. painting, rhythms, singing
Children learn at different rates	Allow time for various small-group and individual experiences
Play, imagination, humor are important qualities in our lives	Read silly poems or humorous stories to children; they need to laugh; it releases tension; can develop a sense of humor
Health habits need to be developed	Videotapes, resource personnel can be invited to present dental information, doctors, policemen or women, sports figures, firemen
Words teachers use in interactions with children encourage or discourage them	Let children know they should try to do various activities; develop attitudes of liking new activities; let them know we support all efforts that they make
Teachers should value time spent in showing children how to act and what to say	Children can learn how to interact effectively with others if teachers focus on interrelationships and resolving conflicts
Children need help in being aware of their own feelings	Stories, classroom situations, videos, can be used to show examples of how children describe their feelings in various situations

The **sixth** guideline for helping children make gains at school is in effective practices that help them know that they are valued as individuals. Teachers have to be aware that it is not only the content of subject matter that has long-term effects on children's personality make-up. Effective knowledge on what to say and do when we are with peers is very helpful in building support for our own readiness to respond to others. When children know that others like them, and like to play or work with them, it goes a long way in helping them in being able to understand what they are expected to learn. Children can be at ease when they do not have to worry about being rebuffed by someone or having to fight for what they want.

No one grows up without having arguments with others. It is the extent to which a child has to continually take a position or be angry because he or she is not able to have a day somewhat free of conflict. The frequency of arguing and the seriousness of not being able to play amicably with others can interfere with a child's doing well at school. Books or videotapes on how arguments are resolved or how teachers can approach squabbling, which does take place in a classroom or in groups of children, are helpful for the teacher and children.

Bibliotherapy, which includes lists of resources for the benefit of focusing on children's feelings and the way they solved their problems, is very instructive. When a child's mother is having a baby, when a child loses a puppy, when a child loses a family member and many other issues occurring in a child's life are treated in books specifically written to help children know how to deal with their losses, sadness or frustration.

Children see many conflicts on television. Sometimes adults approve of the way the issue was resolved; sometimes they do not. Teachers have to help children learn about approved ways to solve problems and those that support a democratic society. We have to show that honesty does pay off. We have to support incidents that show how people help one another or are unselfish in the way they interact with others.

When teachers can emphasize qualities that will serve children well in their interactions with others, it is to the children's advantage. Habits built early at school can enhance the child's further development.

Our technological society surrounds us with faster and more complicated tools that give us greater amounts of information than we ever thought were possible. There are so many new techniques available to us that can make our lives more interesting and productive. We cannot keep that information or technology from children. The **seventh** guideline in bringing a wholesome reality to children relates to a knowledge of technological tools. Some of the toys children have are based on manufacturers' knowledge of techniques that make toys almost come alive. Action toys, electronic instruments for children, computers and software designed for children are testimony to the fact that our technologies are continuing to become more sophisticated.

For many of us who are not comfortable with the need to learn how to use the valuable tools that can help a complex society, we may not feel happy with the idea to teach children about them. Children do not find it as difficult as adults. The software is adapted to the age of the child. Teachers have to be careful that their own biases against computers not interfere with the children's benefits from learning about them.

The **eighth** guideline in allowing our philosophy to become a reality in the classroom with children is the need to recognize cultural diversities in enjoying the world and its people. Children can be happy with various people on their own terms. They can relate to others because they are happy when they play with them. Children do not typically think of categories of liking or disliking based on physical appearances of people.

Teachers have to emphasize qualities and characteristics in people. Human relationships with others of various backgrounds are open to enjoyment and appreciation. One-to-one relationships do not have to be classified in terms of racial categories that have been created by authors or scholars.

Scientific or humanistic studies from earliest life until today have attempted to categorize people and situations in order to study them. Sometimes fictional or nonfictional writers classified people and generalized about their behavior. The theater also capitalized on making general statements about classes of people. Children, however, if not exposed to those statements, relate to others on an individualistic basis.

In a world that has become homogenized with various people interacting, children will appreciate differences as an accepted fact. They will be more prepared than others might have been to be open to a world where differences can co-exist. Not only can they co-exist, but children might really enjoy them. So much of what a teacher does in the classroom can affect the development of the children's minds. We have to be very sensitive and aware of what we say to children. We should not state negative thoughts about people on the basis of physical appearance or a category that society may have chosen to create and use frequently.

The **ninth** guideline for making children's classroom an encouraging, wholesome, and productive place to be is the highlight of language development. Language learning is not only essential to the acquisition of knowledge, rational thought, and processes of reasoning, it also affects a child's personality development. The way a child expresses himself or herself is core to the personality.

An adequate vocabulary to use in speaking can carry a child's conveyance of thought a long way. Our vocabularies usually increase the older we get. Our speech, reading, hearing what others say, watching some television programs, for example, some of the children's programs that focus on language development, or documentaries on factual information serve to expand vocabularies.

Interaction with adults, younger and older children also add to learning about meaning and words. Learning how to use correct grammar in speech and thought, of course, can occur when children hear someone speak in that manner. Children cannot model what we hope they will, if they do not hear or see someone or groups say and do what we value in our society (e.g., correctly expressed English serves a purpose).We have a great responsibility as teachers for helping children enhance their language usage. We have to listen carefully to what they say so that we can add to their styles of language.

Gardner discusses one of the intelligences--intrapersonal intelligence--which involves an awareness of our own feelings. Teachers can help children identify and label their feelings in order to let others know how children are thinking and feeling. Teachers need to interact with the

children in their classroom in order to know them and their personality characteristics. Children can build strengths in personality dimensions and knowledge based on that kind of attention. Surely many of us can remember teachers who gave us individualized attention and are grateful to them for it.

Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog discuss the importance of teachers' interactions with children. "Teachers who are sensitive to children's needs and who engage, encourage, and verbally communicate with them appear to be nurturing more optimal cognitive, language, and socioemotional development." (p. 11)

Language facility is crucial to children's abilities, to the way they make a mark for themselves among peers and adults, and to the way they are able to dream for the future. With all the research that has been done on children's development, we still are not sure what they are capable of doing at various ages. Children of the same age differ greatly among one another. Even children in the same family differ in relation to the experiences they have had and how they have been treated.

Language facility is very significant in terms of a child's self-concept. The better the child can express what she or he needs, the more likely it is that the child will get it. This observation is not intended to imply that <u>every</u> wish of a child, (whether beneficial or not for the child's development), should be granted. But children must be able to interact effectively with others so that their self-impressions can be positive. They should be able to feel valued by others.

Teachers can help children in their relationships and conversation with other children in and outside of the classroom. Hopefully, the teacher has ample social skills and knowledge about children's feelings and how to solve problems with children and their peers. In the Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog report on an analysis of teacher-child interactions in the classroom, they say, "In one study, during lengthy observation, nearly one-third (31%) of the children received no individual attention and, incredibly, in 12% of the classrooms, one-half or more of the children received no individual attention." (p. 5) We are aware that a teacher's time is a factor in the process of individual interaction. But it is very

important to the child's development to have individualized attention. It not only affects their cognitive or intellectual development, but it is extremely important to the child's personality development and social interaction processes. Teachers are often surprised by what a child knows and feels when they talk to them individually.

The **tenth** and last guideline for bringing our philosophical ideas into reality when we plan for or are with children in the classroom is that children need to be allowed to be silly in activities involving poetry, singing, dancing, art. They need to laugh. Teachers need to know when it is appropriate. Laughter and humor eases tension as all of us know.

Laughter and playfulness are also pivotal in helping children know that it is not life-threatening to try doing something new (that is safe) in the classroom. Experimentation is built on playful actions. When scientists experiment with ideas, they often have the attitude, "Let's see what would happen if I try this method." Curiosity in the relationships between things or processes (e.g., mixing paints to see what color results, or playing with the arrangement of shapes in collage activities) is instructive. It guides children in developing new ideas. It lets them know how resourceful they can be. It helps them value their own thinking.

Children need to be encouraged to try new activities without the fear that their performance must be perfect at all time. The curiosity that comes with experimenting is part of a playful attitude. Seriousness, of course, is crucial to responding well on a test. Concentration is important. But teachers can introduce things that children realize are silly. They can learn that teachers approve of incidents that are funny. Children, however, should <u>not be encouraged</u> to laugh or tease someone at the expense or hurt feelings of a child who fell down or made a mistake in his or her work.

It is obvious the teacher's role is not an easy one. Wise judgement needs to be exercised at all times in the classroom or out on the playground. It is not easy to always be aware of what is said to a child so that the child is not offended. Being introspective all day long with children is a challenge. When teachers do this so that it becomes habit, however, it can become somewhat easier. As teachers, too, we have our moods. Being

aware that we do, and becoming increasingly cognizant of our own biases regarding the directions that children's development should take, can help us become more sensitive to what we need to check in ourselves before expressing a flip thought aloud to a child. If it can hurt or embarrass a child, it is best not to say it. If it is serious enough to express in a constructive way to a child, take the child aside in a one-to-one context.

The teacher is always a model for the child, even though it may not be his or her intention. Self-models are not the choice of an adult. Children will emulate what they wish to or what appeals to them in another individual. The person who is the model to someone else does not have a choice of whether or not he or she will be selected by others, therefore we cannot say we do not want to be a model for children. That choice is not ours. It is the decision of others to emulate certain behaviors of their own choice.

B. Satisfaction of Ideals Realized

Most teachers have very high ideals for children in their classroom. They know how a teacher's behavior affects the children's enjoyment, learning, and being at school. At times, however, the teacher's hopes and dreams for children are not put into action. Children are depending on us as teachers to make their world at school a good place to be. The guidelines suggested above can be segmented into smaller components. They can more easily be examined by looking at or analyzing smaller parts of each guideline.

Each teacher finds his or her own way of analyzing self-behavior. Typically these analyses are an effective way of thinking about what we actually say and do with children in the classroom. It is worth the time to be introspective about it. And it is well worth the time to bring changes in our own behavior so that it benefits children. They will respond. In that sense we can receive greater satisfaction from our work as a teacher.

Having worked with students who are preparing to become teachers of young children, it is obvious that they are very idealistic. They want to be all things to all children at all times. Often, however, having high hopes of being a paragon of virtuous teaching, discourages a teacher who faces the "reality" of face-to-face experiences in the classroom. Experiences in the

student teaching process can be a rude awakening for some university students in terms of how the children respond as a group in the classroom. This is why it is helpful when they have some ideas as to what is possible and what might be more difficult before they even enter a classroom. They can learn that planning for certain activities for children and organizing their own time as well as the children's can be effective in helping the children feel successful when they are at school.

The new teacher learns how it feels to have twenty-five pairs of children's eyes watching their every move, waiting to hear what they are expected to do next. Following directions is not easy for young children. The teacher has to learn what children are able to do, the time it takes to do it, and what is simple or challenging enough to attempt. That kind of planning and anticipation of skills and performance can make the children's time at school pleasant and effective.

The teacher's willingness to help children accomplish what she or he knows they can, goes a long way in providing constructive and successful work for children. Teachers must feel satisfaction in what they do for children or they become discouraged. They begin to think they are not good teachers and do not want to stay in the profession. Emotional dissatisfaction in the classroom also contributes to the teacher's "burned-out" feeling. Thus the idealism, we hope, can match the reality of what goes on in the classroom by having the teacher know what to offer children for their healthy growth in cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.

Summary

Often the wishes for becoming an excellent teacher so that children can have the best advantages in their lives are greatly expanded. Most teachers and especially new ones want to help children learn to become skillful and resourceful. Teachers can easily feel they are failures if they do not sense that the children are doing well and successfully learning under their direction. The ten guidelines above can help teachers know how to translate their high aspirations into the reality of the classroom. Each teacher will have his or her own style in interpreting those guidelines. It can be exciting to put into practice.

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